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AF FOR A/S FRAZER FROM VICKI HUDDLESTON

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [ET](#) [ELEC](#)

SUBJECT: PM MELES AND PARLIAMENTARY OPPOSITION AGREE TO DIALOGUE

Classified By: CDA Vicki Huddleston for reason 1.4 (b,d)

1. (C) Summary: PM Meles told me in a meeting on Dec. 9 that he would personally participate in the new round of political dialogue with Parliamentary opposition leaders, which would begin with three days of talks Dec. 12-14. While initially limited to leaders of the UEDF and OFDM, the PM hoped that representatives of MPs elected under the CUD banner could be included as soon as the group chose new leadership. CUD leaders currently imprisoned are a matter for the courts to handle, he added. The eight-point agenda agreed during the October political dialogue -- which covered several "rule of law issues", the Parliament, the media and the National Electoral Board (NEB) -- would form the basis of discussion. Meles saw issues falling into two categories: 1) constitutional obligations, such as an effective Parliament or an independent NEB, and 2) discretionary measures that might increase political space, such as giving opposition leaders chairmanships of Parliamentary committees, or consulting them on nominees to the NEB. The PM also signaled political unrest in Oromiya and the role of the OLF in Ethiopian politics would constitute an important side agenda of the discussions. Meles said British Amb. Dewar and I would be included in the initial session of talks on Dec. 12, but that thereafter the international community would merely be briefed and invited to weigh in on "issues of principle." While potential pitfalls abound, this new round of dialogue offers the best way forward for achieving all the goals expressed in the U.S.-EU statement of Nov. 6. End Summary.

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New Dialogue Takes Up Where Last One Left Off -- Minus CUD  
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2. (C) On December 8, UK Ambassador Bob Dewar and I met with PM Meles to provide him with a readout of our meeting, including the Troika, with opposition parliamentarians. I related to him that Dr. Beyene and Dr. Merera of the United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF) and Bulcha Demeksa of the Oromo Federal Democratic Movement (OFDM) were serious and constructive in their response to his offer to initiate discussions based on the eight-point agenda previously agreed during the last phase of dialogue involving the UEDF, CUD leaders and the EPRDF in October. I told him that they accepted the government's four agenda items regarding adherence to the constitution and disassociation from all political forces that promote violence. I indicated that UEDF and OFDM would like to discuss: 1) rule of law,

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especially the Oromo region and arrests and deaths of opposition members; 2) a review of Parliamentary rules and increasing political space; 3) NEB capacity-building and the naming of a new board; and 4) an independent and responsible media. Prime Minister Meles responded that he is pleased to talk with the opposition as long as it is a real dialogue and not one designed to play to the gallery.

3. (C) Meles said that Bulcha should be included in this new dialogue. (He was not present in the previous one.) The PM indicated that he would like to include a leader from the sixty CUD MPs in Parliament, but as yet they were not properly organized. However, when these Parliamentarians were ready (presumably under a new name, as CUD will be charged as a criminal organization) he would be willing to include them in this dialogue, or in a separate one. I replied that the UEDF leaders had also suggested including CUD representatives as soon as possible.

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International Community Role Limited  
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4. (C) As to the presence of mediators or observers from the international community, the PM said it would be beneficial for the US and UK to observe Monday's opening discussion, if for no other reason than to make it clear that Ethiopia's friends can help, but cannot determine the course of Ethiopian democracy. "This a dialogue between Ethiopians and cannot be a show," Meles said. He added that the EPRDF's policy was not directed at maintaining foreign aid; the EPRDF was weak in the face of powerful ideas -- not when confronted

with blackmail. Ethiopia wanted as many friends as possible, but those friends cannot go beyond international standards and interfere, Meles said. If they did so, dialogue would not be worthwhile. International friends have a legitimate stake in the principles of governance, not in making life easier for the opposition leaders. Therefore international mediators would not be necessary but we -- Ambassador Dewar and myself -- would be kept informed of progress. The process would be rather like a donor governance project which the government must carry out, but keep donors aware of progress, the PM said. (Note: Opposition leaders plan to ask that the U.S. and U.K. remain engaged as observers.)

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The OLF Factor Looms Large  
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15. (C) Meles indicated that he was especially interested in the agenda item raised by Bulcha and Merera regarding the rule of law in Oromiya. The PM said he had met with leaders of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) in Bonn and they had expressed interest in joining Parliament via one of the existing parties (likely the ONC of Merera or the OFDM of Bulcha). He had told the OLF that they could pursue this course of action with the Parliamentary parties outside of Ethiopia. However, the OLF had become illegal again by calling for insurrection, and yet continued to use the same Parliamentary party. The issue was extremely delicate, as Meles said he did not want to close off possibilities. This is a question of "seeing but not seeing" the Parliamentary opposition party as a front organization. Bulcha had little "plausible deniability" that he was already acting as a front for the OLF, and Merera would find it difficult to make the case. The PM said he would review these issues privately with Bulcha and Merera. "As for the OLF, they had blown up the bridge. They may change their views and if so, we will play. But the ball is in their court."

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Issues: Some Constitutional, Some Discretionary  
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16. (C) The way in which the dialogue/discussion would be carried out, Meles said, is by reviewing two categories, as follows:

-- Category One: Constitutional obligations that both sides must agree to and carry out. For example, it is the government's responsibility to assure a Parliamentary democracy that meets international standards, but whether it provides the opposition with additional political space is category two. I suggested and the PM agreed that an effective NEB would be category one, but consulting with the opposition on new board members would be category two.

-- Category Two: Issues that are not constitutional obligations, but rather part of civic duty. These issues are also important and should be discussed, e.g. Parliamentary practices that could be helpful as part of the give and take, but which were not a constitutional obligation. This category would require negotiation and "haggling" among parties, Meles said.

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CUD Not Present, But Not Forgotten  
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17. (C) Ambassador Dewar stated that ideally CUD leaders detained would participate in a dialogue and the courts would recognize Dr. Merera as President of the party he founded (the ONC). Dewar also pressed for a mediator. (Neither of these issues were criteria presented to the US and Troika, but Bob and I agreed they should be raised. In fact, the Parliamentary opposition in our earlier meeting specifically rejected EU Ambassador Clark's warning that dialogue without the CUD was dangerous, saying that the gains they make will be for all the opposition.) Meles responded that it would be excellent to gain agreement on category one issues, but it was equally important to create an environment for category two issues, at which point Ethiopian mediators might be used. (According to the Austrian ambassador, Meles had recently met with a well connected group of elders. He may be planning to include them at some stage.) As for the CUD leaders in detention, Meles reiterated that that was now a legal issue and would be settled by the courts. Those CUD MPs not in Parliament but not detained had three choices: to join Parliament; not to join, but to remain on a legal path; or to follow an illegal course and be detained. As for the NEB's decision that Merera was no longer the leader of the ONC, Meles was disappointed in Merera, who must sort this out via the legal system and not ask for favors. (While this argument is technically defensible, the government was clearly complicit in spinning up internal ONC opposition to Merera.)

18. (C) I told the PM that I was pleased that he would participate personally in this round of dialogue, and that it might have helped us succeed during the first dialogue if he

had been more directly involved. The PM replied that previous dialogue could not have succeeded because it was "rotten at the core" (note: presumably due to the CUD's perceived hidden agenda.) This time around, however, he wanted to participate and would be available to do so Dec. 12-14, prior to his departure for Khartoum. Meles said he would not participate in the entire dialogue, and would eventually turn it over to "the previous negotiator" (former Information Minister Bereket Simon.) He said that he hoped all parties would put all their cards on the table.

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Comment: Climate Appears Propitious for Renewed Dialogue  
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19. This is new dialogue is a welcome development. Both the Prime Minister and Opposition appear to be going into it in good faith and in a constructive spirit. UEDF leader Beyene Petros struck a note of caution during a follow-up breakfast with me on Dec. 9, however, telling me and other dialogue participants that Meles has used past discussions like this merely to size up his opponents and probe their weaknesses, rather than to advance democracy. Dr. Merera also noted that the GOE had talked a lot about delivering progress while actually delivering little. Bulcha Demeksa and Merera are clearly wondering how the PM will handle the issue of the OLF. Nonetheless, the current dialogue appears to offer the best way forward for achieving all the goals expressed in the U.S.-EU statement of Nov. 6.  
HUDDLESTON